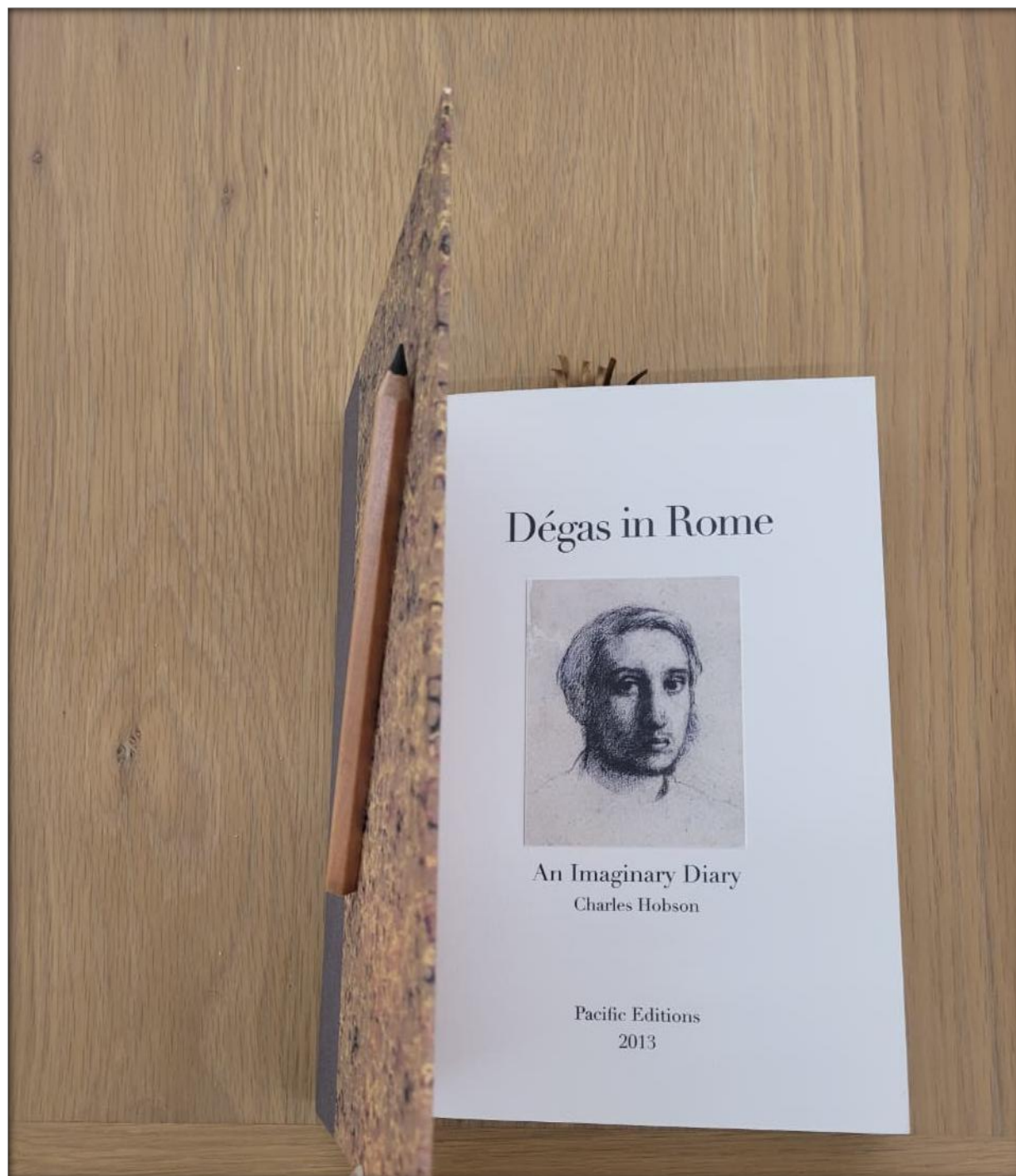


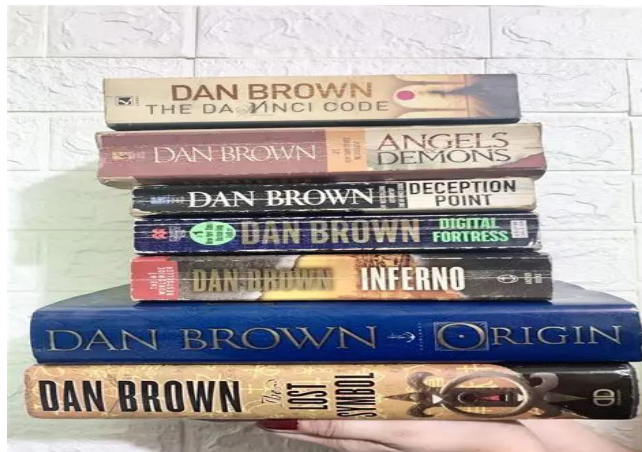
*Degas in Rome: An Imaginary Journal written by Charles Hobson*

Keamogetswe Podile



## Where two artists meet

Something has always drawn me to Rome, a restlessness, a curiosity marked around its history. Dan Brown sparked my interest with *The Da Vinci Code*, *Angels & Demons*, *Inferno* series, these books shaped my interest into an obsession. My fixation on the papacy and the Vatican, fuelled by my Catholic upbringing, deepened my intrigue. Like Brown's hero Robert Langdon, I began chasing symbols through cathedrals and archives, not for the Holy Grail or the bones of Mary Magdalene, but for the thrill of decoding a city that reads like scripture.



Needless to say, my experience of the Jack Ginsberg Centre for Book Arts (JGCBA) left me astounded and overwhelmed. Shelves upon shelves were stockpiled with diverse types of book art – at the time I had no idea of the purpose of book art. What was it trying to tell me? What was I looking for? I scanned the room, searching for Roman symbolism, or should I say anything that embodied Rome and the Vatican. Something nudged me to keep looking, it forced me to search deeper. I encountered a book with the ten commandments, and its contents filled with fictitious stories, based on the Bible. Yet, I still found myself searching.

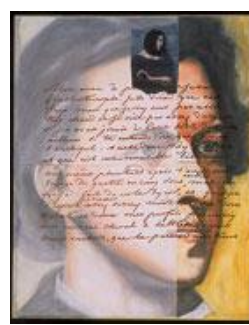
It was upon my second visit to the Jack Ginsberg Centre for Book Arts, that I was drawn to a grey mapped box and a book with pencil stuck right on the top. I had not looked at the title yet; I was merely intrigued. You see, I was still learning about the idea of book arts – it perplexed me that someone can just create a new book from existing ones, to shift and change their dynamics completely. A secret hidden in between pages, that only the artist knows of. Fine lines drawn in a specific way, words erased and marked by symbolism.



I held this diary sized book; the spine had raised bands that I could not see yet. The first part of colour shimmering on the cover. *Degas in Rome: An Imaginary Diary*—Charles Hobson stamped the title in gold. I had found my Holy Grail. I found the doorway to Rome.

It was titled *Degas in Rome: An Imaginary Diary* by Charles Hobson. It is an artist's book based on the journey of Edgar Degas, an Impressionist artist. This book mimicked an old-fashioned book cover, a hardcover book. The immobile pencil, thick and perfectly sharpened, placed on the top of the cover – insinuation that his work is not done or that no one else had the rightful claim to it. The front matter of this book displayed as a cover page – unveiling the title, as most hardcover, traditional books would have. It gives a view of an introduction to a diary type memoir.

This book imagines Edgar Degas's mid-nineteenth-century Frenchman acts as a daily notebook and, uses monotyping to bring to together the past and the present. The same technique Degas himself was a pioneer of the in the mid-1870s, centred around the duplicity, repetition, and transformation of art. It was not a style set for repeating the artwork using the copper plate and paint, but it is the art of recreating the art already printed. This brought out the accents of luminosity and variations of colours present or bring the artwork to life by layering each monotype. Charles features Degas in his art books, as a way of honouring him and his use of monotyping, creation new artworks, use of a copper plate which developed the dark and light printing to create the luminosity reflected in Degas's work. Hobson's passion and ideas present this dark and light style, whilst diving into the socio-political history or present that he needed for that time.



From L to R:  
Monotype, ghost,  
completed image  
with collage

This review will capture the elements and designs of this artist's book to parallel the artistic innovations of Degas and Hobson, their use of texture, lighting, and similar techniques. Hobson's book will allow one to explore the how Hobson manages to capture Degas' stylistic patterns while showing his own artistic flare.

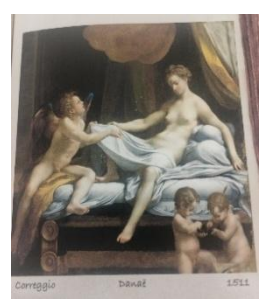
## Beauty of the Book

*'In Rome, found his muse' – Degas in Rome: An Imaginary Diary*

To my surprise, the pages inside the book functioned as a new or different diary entry. The pages had been pasted down, pages about as small as an A5 book, heavy, A5-scale leaves tipped onto larger, tea-stained grounds. The bigger page itself functioned as a background, brown coloured and aged pages.

The diary acts as a guide to Degas' week-long journey through Rome, and through the Renaissance era of art dated 1857. Through the journey of Renaissance artists Michaelangelo, Raphael, Titian, Caravaggio, and Correggio. Each page or "chapter" held three-four things in common – handwritten journal entry, inscribed with the date, a famous artwork, a map of Rome, another map with his face sketched onto it, a final sketch, and a bookmark relating to the specific art piece. The handwritten entry was stylised with the stroke of a quill.

All the elements in this book speak to each other – work together to give the idea of what Rome was about to him. It was personified as a woman, an art piece/element that could take on various forms. The journal literally and metaphorically unfolds the discoveries he might have made. The entire story folds out like an accordion. This being a form Hobson often experiments with in his book art.



The art pieces featured in the book are *Salome* by Titian, *Danae* by Correggio, *The Penitent Mary Magdalene* by Caravaggio, *Capitoline Venus Statue*, and *Galatea* by Michelangelo

*During this period, Degas was greatly influenced by the works of Michelangelo, da Vinci, Giotto, and Titian. – Isabella Meyer, Art in Context*

*I can print a monotype as a layer over another pattern or picture as well as work over it with pastel or acrylic. – Charles Hobson*

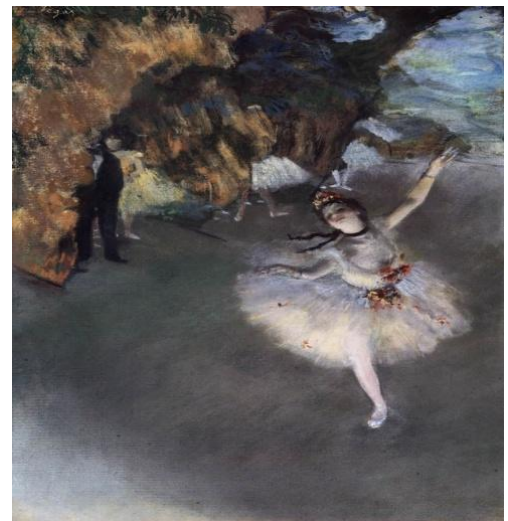
The artworks and sketches in this book give life to his words. Rome talks back to him, but not in the conventional way. Hobson taps into the style of the monotype to create and design his unique style. This shows itself in *Degas in Rome*, where he uses different maps, sketches, and attempts to sketch Degas' face over them. The beauty behind this is, no map looked the same, he had the same monotype, but different facial features showed. The maps are inspired by the places where Degas might have travelled in his time in Rome.

*Original drawings in the style of Degas have been made by Charles Hobson with pencil on stained or acrylic washed paper and reproduced as high resolution digital prints that have been accented with handwork in many instances – Colophon, Stanford Library*

This was another method employed by Hobson in his sketches of the various woman in each painting and sculpture. His own stylistic flare was shown through each page, in his attempt to get each sketch right, he brings life to his own work and style of art. Degas as a muse, however, still shines through the art.

*Dance and movement captivated Degas, which led to his fascination with ballerinas. He chose to depict dancers in various stages and places, such as on stage or waiting behind the stage. – Isabella Meyer, Art in Context.*

A most noted subject in his artwork were ballerinas, there was a notable name given to him and his painting mediums and subjects of art, “Degas ballerina.” There often came an assumption that Degas was preoccupied with women and their bodies. He drew the oddities, and women in their natural element. His disdain for artificial lighting, made him embrace the beauty of natural lighting.



Edgar Degas, *The Star*  
(*Dancer on the Stage*), 1878.

His art was recognised as starting a new chapter in the world of art, mastering his own technique. He was said to be one of the pioneers of Impressionism. Yet he insisted that he was a Realist artist and sculptor. His use of capturing natural light in an indoor setting helped create a realistic type of drawing. When he employed the monotype technique, it allowed him to bring forth the radiance to the paintings. He was enticed by movement, rehearsal, labour, off-stage routines, reframing/cropping mundane innovations. This inspiration struck absence of artificial light pushed him to paint and sketch the oddities and the everyday life routine of women. He captured these rare moments, that the art society criticised him for, and transformed these paintings into a new work of art. He achieves this by creating art and starting the process again to recreate the art. Monotypes do not print the same every time, this layering is what shaped his drawings.

There lies beauty in the art of capturing someone or trying to master someone's technique, the mistakes made become new pieces and evolve into their own form of art. A signature artform that evolves only by recreation. The nature in which Degas sketched, drew, and sculpted this idea into reality. His passion with painting and art drew him to the strangest pieces and art works, while some were criticised, others received endless praise.

A fascinating feature in this book art, were the pull-out ribbon bookmarks. They detailed the information and details each original famous artwork and its history. The other side of each bookmark were facial features. When laid out, it revealed an oil-based painting of Degas' portrait (digitised). This sparked a thought in my head, Hobson not only incorporated Degas' stylistic techniques with his own, but the bookmarks also held a reminder that the book is a portrait of Degas. An image of him split in pieces, made me think of how all parts of Degas are featured around Rome. His full journey, becoming a reflection of who Degas was and his life of art.



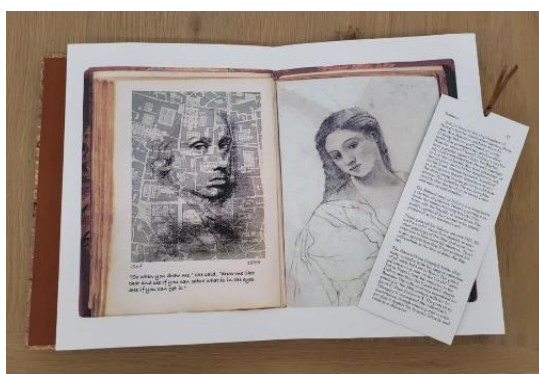
L – ribbon pull out  
bookmarks

R – Degas self-  
portrait printed on  
the back

*While Degas was studying in Italy, he meticulously reproduced the linear control seen within the artworks of expert Florentine artists like Michelangelo in his copies, before being captivated by the lure of Titian's artistic style. – Isabella Meyer, Art in Context.*

Hobson used the fragmented pieces of Degas's face as the information cards, tying together pieces of Degas's artistry and style. Pieces that tie together influences of his artwork, and the tiny pieces that may have resonated with Degas.

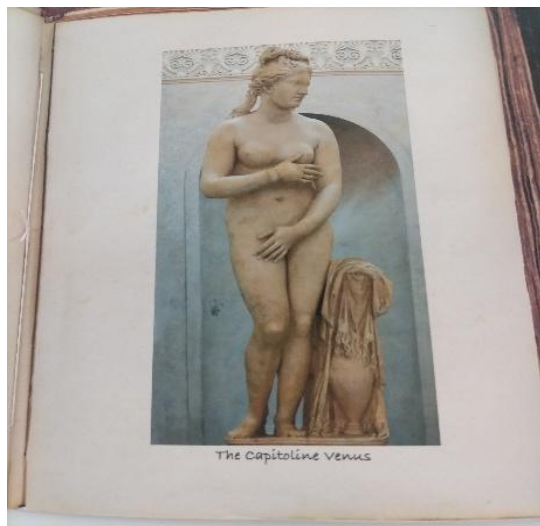
The way Hobson captures Degas drew me to a different side of Rome. The Rome that centres itself around art, beauty, and stylistic freedom. The artwork presented in Rome was often obscure and expected. However, taking a look at the work of Michelangelo and Raphael, their *fresco* style of painting were innovative works at the time. Michelangelo's painting of the Sistine Chapel was beauty plastered onto the ceiling. The biggest artistic style seen is the theme of religion and mythology. He was consumed over these things. Hobson captured that artistic style by choosing artworks of women who had biblical origin or were famous in Roman and Greek mythology. He stripped down the style of the pictures to sketches, showing his own artistic ability, whilst still reflecting the various overlay sketches of Degas. The passion over drawing ballerinas and women, evolved and changed as he shifted from assorted styles. Hobson's inclusion of maps, and their link between each other, helps navigate throughout the Rome that Degas may have traveled. He later etches self-portraits of Degas on the maps – these are taken from the eighteen self-portraits made by Degas. He gives the map life, giving Rome a life, allowing us to see how Degas was deeply entrenched in his art.



From L to R: a self-portrait on a map next to a sketch of Salome, and the original copies of maps with important places.

The artworks in Hobson's book are all women, but not just any woman, those painted and sculpted by Degas' influences. Michelangelo, Raphael, and more specifically, Titian. This captures close aspects and details of work done by Degas. Hobson's choice of using women reflects the attention and detailing Degas discovered in women dancing in the ballet or those in the pub. Hobson's choice of work, not only shows Degas' inspiration and influence, but provides the deep, artistic admiration he held for Degas.

The turning point for me when holding this book, was finding out who Degas actually was, and what Hobson was trying to achieve shifted my entire perspective of this artist's book. His work was deeply rooted in the world of Degas, but Hobson shines through using the similar stylistic techniques. This creation allowed me to see beyond Hobson's imagined world of Degas, but to focus on the idea of how articulate and precise he was in capturing this experience. He chose the medium, he chose monotyping, he chose to strip down and reconstruct new sketches in a way that Degas might have created his art. His use of the maps and sketches on it captures the nature of creation and recreation, developed and developing art in existence. As said before, the immobile pencil acts as a tool for the unfinished or recreation. This 2013 Hobson book brings out the innovative artist that was Edgar Degas.



*Capitoline Venus, 1816*



*Deconstructed Venus sketched by Hobson.*

The sketches recreated by Hobson in this artbook, can be seen as a reflection of how his muse wanted these paintings to look. Rome was Degas' muse, whereas Hobson's muse existed both in Rome and in Degas. He took parts of each painting, mimicking the style Degas had perfected. These sketches were vulnerable and stripped down, they captured a part of the painting, the main woman. The woman that is Degas' tour guide around Rome, shows him

the beauty and rawness behind the art of the city. This woman begged to be seen in a unique way, to be sketched in an unusual way. Lady Rome communicated this. She asked to be called by different names, not the one she currently is associated with. These create the image of how no sketch or recreation of art will be the same, Lady Rome commissioned him to recreate her art. The sketches in Hobson's sketchbook reflected how he saw Rome, but through the eyes of Degas. Hobson immersed himself in Rome, following the same maps and art pieces that captivated Degas. The accordion shape of the book created a non-linear roadmap of Degas's journey as an artist, and the non-linear art that Hobson creates. His experience of Rome in the footsteps of Degas, presents itself on every single page. These recreations became brand new artworks, sketches that can be imagined having been drawn right outside on a bench by the Sistine Chapel.

This book is a quintessential example of the meeting of two artists. Hobson's recreation of a world inhabited by the journey of Degas through Rome, not only gives us Degas' possible stylistic and structural techniques, not only manages to bring out a sense of Degas, but completely shifts between centuries and creates a contemporary style and art influenced by Degas. He, therefore, illustrates, Degas's Italian influence and experimental monotyping (present in the maps, folds, and bookmarks) to create a printing plate and Degas a face mosaiced through streets, saints, and light. Hobson's method of painting and stylistic creativity did not attempt to outshine or erase Degas' work or prove himself to be better than Degas, but rather demonstrates a 21<sup>st</sup> century contemporary artist becoming an apprentice of Degas and his Impressionist artwork in the 1800s. Therefore, Hobson's creation acts as a tribute, or an untold story, centred around the world of Degas.

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### *Pictures*

Hobson, C. (2013). *Degas In Rome: An Imaginary Diary* [Book Art].

Photographed:

- Cover page
- The five artworks chosen for the book.
- The original Capitoline Venus
- The recreated sketch
- Maps

Ballerina artwork

Edgar Degas, *The Star (Dancer on the Stage)*, 1878,

Stańska, Z. (2025, May 21). *Edgar Degas and his most beautiful ballerinas*. DailyArt

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